

# Mom's Cancer Blog

Begun online in 2004 and published by Abrams in 2006, "Mom's Cancer" won the 2005 Eisner Award for Best Digital Comic, the 2007 Lulu Blooker Prize, the 2007 Harvey Award for Best New Talent, and the 2007 German Youth Literature Prize for non-fiction. It was nominated for a 2006 Quill Book Award, a 2006 Cybil Literary Award, the American Library Association's "2007 Best Books for Young Adults" Award, and two 2007 Eisner Awards. I am as surprised as anyone.

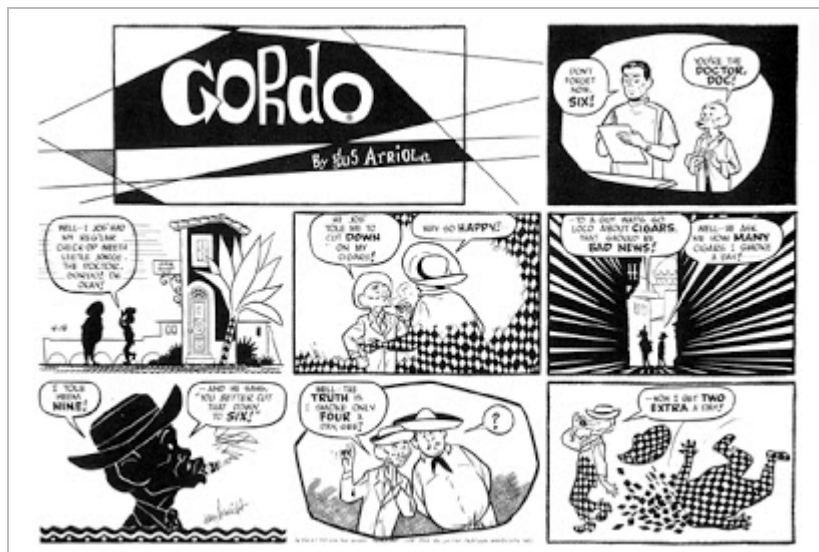
SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 03, 2008

## Gus Arriola and the Language of Lines

Cartoonist Gus Arriola died yesterday at age 90. His Associated Press obit is [here](#). Mr. Arriola wrote and drew the comic strip "Gordo" between 1941 and 1985, when he retired. It's fair to say he's not a household name, but when I was a kid trying to figure out how comics worked, his strip was among those I most frequently clipped and saved. I think he's one of the all-time underrated greats.

"Gordo" was set in Mexico and featured an overweight tour guide, his housekeeper, and various human and animal characters--notably a chihuahua, pig, cat and rooster. The strip had swell characters and an easy-going charm, but what really caught my eye was the way Mr. Arriola played with the language and iconography of comics in ways I'd never seen before. His use of graphics was masterful.

Unfortunately, good examples are hard to come by online and I have no idea where to find my 30-year-old clip file (though I suspect I still have it somewhere). The images below were the best I could find, and you'll just have to take my word that I remember several even better.



(click to see larger)

The Sunday strip above, which I scanned from Jerry Robinson's book

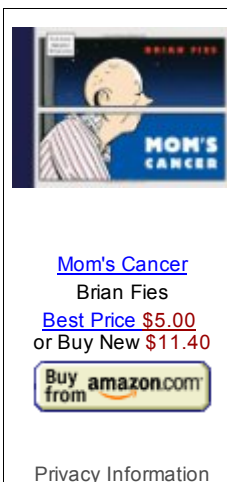
## About Me



Brian Fies

Creator of "Mom's Cancer" and "Whatever Happened to the World of Tomorrow," both published by Abrams. Won some awards, including an Eisner and a Harvey. [brianfies.blogspot.com](http://brianfies.blogspot.com)

[View my complete profile](#)



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*The Comics* (which unfortunately reproduced it in black and white), is a nice piece from 1954. There's a lot of arty goodness going on here: the shapes of panels, the bottom border and negative profile in panel 6, the playful use of lettering guides as a design element in panel 3. Even the cigar smoke in panel 6 is an interesting squiggle. But what sells it is the checkerboard pattern, introduced in panel 4 and finished off in the final panel, where Gordo is not just a checkerboard silhouette, but one that has shattered into surprised shards.



The next Sunday strips are in color and highlight's Mr. Arriola's use of same as well as his incredibly graceful and expressive ink line. I thought he really shined when drawing the animals, particularly in frenetic action accompanied by colorful streaks or lightning bolts. I love the first strip, which is very "meta," in that the cartoonist literally cools off the characters by coloring them in cool colors (and letting in some cross ventilation by cutting two holes through the panel border!).



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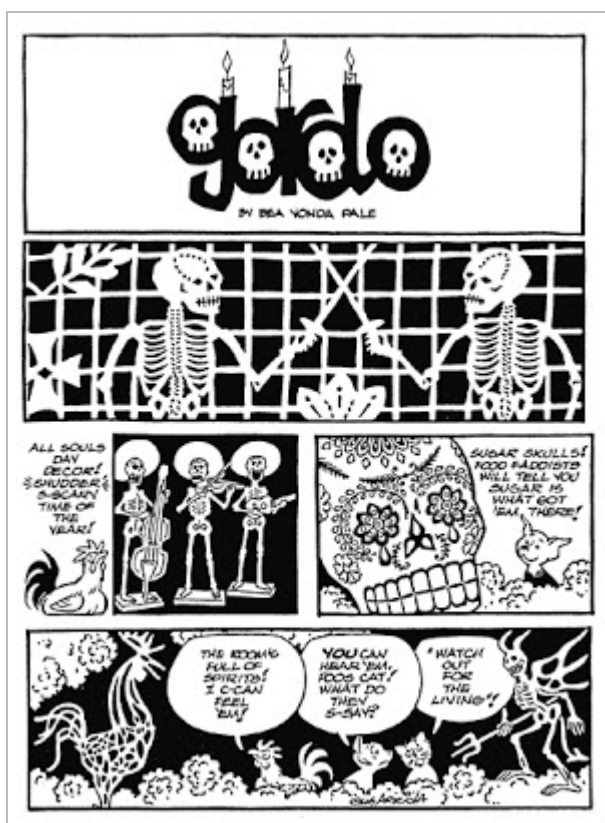
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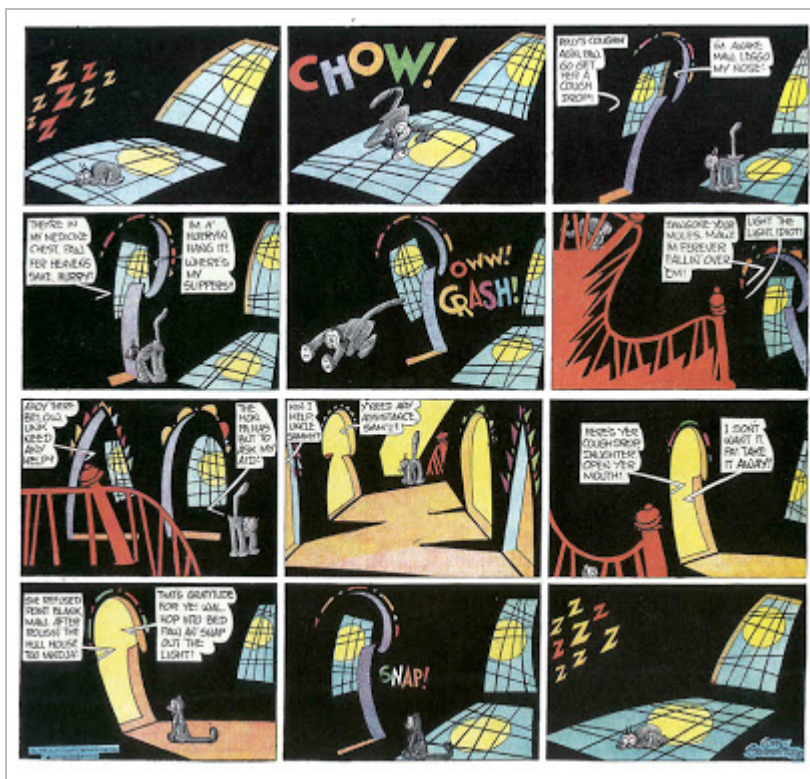
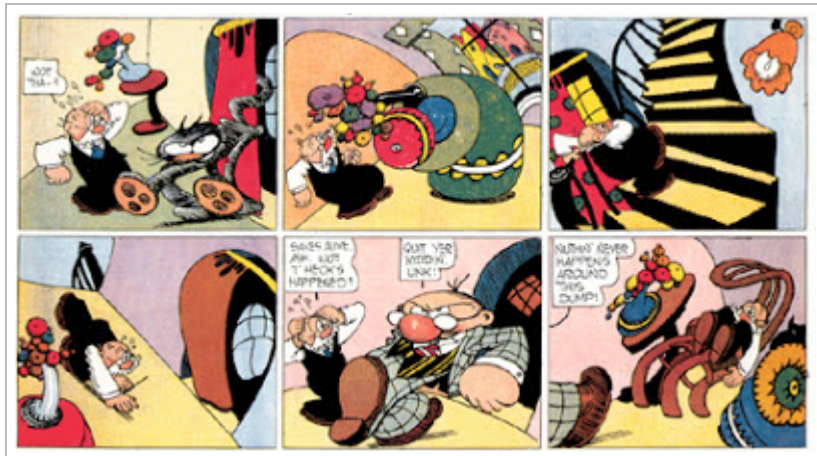
(click either to see larger)

Next, another black-and-white Sunday strip I found online, this one capturing the dark festivities of Dia de los Muertos. Note that these aren't just pretty pictures, but pretty pictures that tell a story. But mostly, it's just Grade-A cartooning.





In his imaginative use of the entire cartoonist's toolbox, I always thought of Arriola as a natural heir to Cliff Sterrett, the best cartoonist you've never heard of. Mr. Sterrett did "Polly and Her Pals" in the 1910s through '30s, when he created innovative, abstract work that was both of its time and far ahead of it. Below are a couple of good examples.



(click either to see larger)

Here's a close-up of that sixth panel, which I think shows just how far comics allows you to push the boundaries of literal representation to communicate an idea--in this case, a spooked cat in the middle of the night--that couldn't be shown any other way. This is just beautiful stuff.



### The Language of Lines

Coincidentally, I learned of Mr. Arriola's death after coming home last night from the opening of a new exhibition at the [Charles Schulz Museum](#) titled "The Language of Lines." The show pretty much covers what I've been writing about: the unique symbolism of comics that instantly communicates an idea, from the antique "light bulb of inspiration" and "sawing log of slumber" to increasingly sophisticated techniques that continue to emerge. Originals in the show date from the early 20th century (including Sterrett) to today, as represented by "Pearls Before Swine" and "Stone Soup," among others. Good examples from "Peanuts," "Pogo," "Doonesbury," "Calvin and Hobbes" and many others illustrate the thesis. When you see Snoopy dance on Schroeder's musical notes, Calvin melt into a puddle of snot, or George W. Bush depicted as an asterisk wearing a Roman soldier's helmet, that's the language of lines.

(An "inside baseball" note: I don't think I've ever seen "Calvin and Hobbes" originals before and was astonished by how small Bill Watterson drew them--particularly his Sundays, which looked even *smaller* than published size to me. Most cartoonists draw originals at least 1.5 to 2 times the size at which they'll be printed, and often larger. For example, "Peanuts" originals are huge. I guess the tight confines gave Watterson the look and line he wanted, but it really surprised me. Very gutsy.)

The exhibition was curated by Brian Walker, cartoonist Mort Walker's son and part of the Walker-Browne dynasty that continues to produce comic strips such as "Beetle Bailey" and "Hi & Lois." However, Brian may be even better known as a comics historian, author and museum curator, having organized dozens of comic art shows in the U.S. and abroad, including the very high-profile "Masters of American Comics" in 2005 through 2007. He also flew across the country to speak at last night's opening.

I've met Brian twice before. We share a publisher in Abrams and, I discovered just last night, the same editor (look out, Charlie, we compared notes). I also met his wife Abby. Brian grew up immersed in comics and is one of the most knowledgeable experts around, and it was a pleasure to reconnect with him. A bad cold, as well as sadness over not being home to see his beloved New York Giants play the Super

Bowl, didn't distract him from giving a nice talk on the language of lines as demonstrated in the pages we then went into the gallery to view. Add some music, wine and snacks, and it was a very memorable evening.

So it was somehow fitting to come home with that exhibition and conversation on my mind, and then read about Mr. Arriola. "Gordo" isn't represented in "The Language of Lines" but it could be--probably should be. It was a very influential strip for me personally. In the bigger picture, I can't help comparing the bold graphic sensibilities of creators like Arriola and Sterrett to the much more pallid, static comic strips of today. If somebody drew comics like that now, it'd be heralded as a cutting-edge creative breakthrough--never mind that Sterrett did it 90 years ago and Arriola 60. This great stuff used to be in the newspaper every day!

Too many contemporary cartoonists and readers don't even remember what they've forgotten.

Posted by [Brian Fies](#) at [9:09 AM](#)



Labels: [Cartooning](#), [People](#), [Rumination](#)

## 11 comments:

**D.D.Degg said...**

I see Art in Gus Arriola's Sunday pages. I like your comparison of Sterrett and Arriola. Despite notions to the contrary I wasn't around to witness the Sterrett Sunday pages first hand. I was, however, fortunate enough to take delight in Arriola's Sundays. Your linking the two of them together with the phrase "bold graphic sensibilities" is perfect.

Something I forgot about was his habit of using phony pseudonyms on his Sunday strips. Anyone know when that started?

Correct the 1995 typo to 1985.

2/03/2008 11:32:00 AM



**[Sherwood Harrington](#) said...**

A magnificent and thoughtful tribute, Brian -- and, like so much of your stuff, it taught me some things, too. Thanks!

D.D., I had forgotten about the Psunday Pseudonyms, too... and I don't remember when they started, either. But they just added to the coolness.

2/03/2008 02:45:00 PM



**[Mike](#) said...**

Gordo was a strip I wished had continued simply because of

timing -- I'd have paid more attention to it a few years later.

Sigh.

Timing is everything!

2/03/2008 07:46:00 PM



**ronnie** said...

My God, I'm simply floored by his technique - and his creativity. That panel where the chequerboard Gordo falls to pieces - simply eye-stopping!

Does anyone know of any Arriola collections or books? Like Herriman, he looks like an artist who is so creative he could be well-enjoyed in large bites.

ronnie

2/04/2008 06:21:00 PM



**Sherwood Harrington** said...

Ronnie, I bought *Accidental Ambassador Gordo* from Amazon about a year and a half ago, and it's a pretty good overview of Arriola's strip throughout its run. My only gripe is that too many of the soap-strip arcs (which compare very, very favorably to FBOFW's) are truncated -- but, I suppose, that was necessary to sample many decades' worth of output.

I just checked over at Amazon, and apparently they're having a run on the book, as is understandable.

2/04/2008 06:59:00 PM



**Brian Fies** said...

Thanks for the comments everyone. DD, thanks for catching the typo, which I unthinkingly picked up from the AP obit. No idea when Mr. Arriola began using the fake names, but they were something I always looked for.

Ronnie, the book Sherwood mentioned is the only one I know of, apart from a couple of old strip collections you won't be able to find. I haven't read "Accidental Ambassador Gordo" but it has a good reputation. Fair warning: Arriola saved his mind-blowing graphical whimsy for Sundays, and I recall the daily being more ... sedate. But the strip always had a gentle charm and the quality of his art, and particularly his lively ink line, was really second to none.

2/05/2008 09:35:00 AM



**ronnie** said...

Thanks, everyone - it still sounds like "Accidental Ambassador Gordo" will be a worthwhile addition to my collection, based on

the samples I've seen.

The chequerboard figure shattering just slayed me. Just slayed me!

ronnie

2/06/2008 05:17:00 PM

**Anonymous said...**

Ronnie, there are a few more collections. One is simply called "Gordo", was published in 1950 and has the story line of Pepito and Gordo both falling in love with the same woman. I got my copy on e-Bay, but I also saw copies on alibris. I read that MR. Arriola self-published "Gold, Ghosts, Girls, and Gordo Galore", but have never been able to find it. I just bought "Gordo Redux", and several people sell strips clipped out of newspapers.

Angelina, there's a possibility that orange foods: pumpkin, sweet potatoes, carrots and such have a beneficial effect for cancer patients. Also spider bites, as odd as that sounds. I'd give you the full story, but it would take too long.

7/22/2008 01:01:00 PM

**Sharon said...**

Tsk. I forgot to leave my name, I forgot 2 other excellent collections, Gordo's Cat and Gordo's Critters, and I forgot to mention that Poosy Gato is given several pages in great Comic Cats. One of my personal favorites is a Sunday strip involving a hummingbird. it visits several flowers, then perches on a sleeping Gordo's sombrero. It then belches, loudly, waking a puzzled Gordo. I always thought that Bete Noire was the funniest critter that Gus Arriola did. Just amazingly drawn, nothing but a black shape, but imbued with typical kitten features. There just weren't enough Bete Noire strips. Funniest was the conjugation of meow. Gus Arriola outdid himself on that one.

7/22/2008 01:38:00 PM

**Namowal (Jennifer Bourne) said...**

Another cartoonist pal reminded me to check out the work of Cliff Sterrett and, a few google clicks later, I found myself at your old blog. Small world! :)

8/07/2013 09:04:00 AM

**Brian Fies said...**

It sure is! Nice to touch base somewhere other than Facebook. Best of luck in your evolving career!

8/07/2013 09:22:00 AM

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